

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01
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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7327
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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USMISSION USUN NY

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PFOV, PORS, IS
SUBJECT: CLASHES OVER SABBATH OBSERVANCE

1. FOR THE THIRD CONSECUTIVE WEEKEND THERE WERE DEMONSTRATIONS AND VIOLENCE IN BNAI BRAK, A SUBURB OF TEL AVIV INHABITED PRIMARILY BY RELIGIOUS JEWS. LONG SMOLDERING COMMUNAL TENSIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS SEGMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY FLARED UP INTO RIOT PROPORTIONS WHEN A VEHICLE DELIBERATELY CRASHED IN A CHAIN BARRICADE ON SABBATH EVE OF JULY 1 KILLING ITS DRIVER AND SERIOUSLY INJURING A PASSENGER. THE FOLLOWING DAY SECULAR ISRAELIS CLASHED WITH RELIGIOUS RESIDENTS AT THE SCENE OF THE ACCIDENT OVER THE ISSUE OF CLOSING STREETS ON THE SABBATH, CHARGING THE LATTER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FATAL ACCIDENT.

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2. SOME SIX WEEKS EARLIER THE TOWN COUNCIL HAD VOTED TO CLOSE HASHOMER STREET, A MAJOR THOROUGHFARE, TO TRAFFIC ON THE SABBATH. THE POLICE HAD GIVEN THEIR APPROVAL, BUT THE TRANSPORT MINISTRY, WHICH NORMALLY HAS JURISDICTION WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT OVER SUCH MATTERS, HAD NOT YET RESPONDED WHEN THE FATAL CLASH OCCURRED. THERE IS,

CONSEQUENTLY, SOME CONFUSION OVER THE LEGALITY OF THE BARRICAGES.

3. ON EACH WEEKEND SINCE THE ACCIDENT, RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ISRAELIS HAVE CLASHED WHILE THE POLICE HAVE ATTEMPTED TO ENFORCE A COMPROMISE WHICH CLOSES THE STREET TO ALL CARS EXCEPT THOSE OWNED BY RESIDENTS OF THE STREET AND THEIR GUESTS. LAST SATURDAY'S (JULY 16) CLASHES WERE THE MOST SERIOUS WITH FIVE POLICEMEN HURT AND 13 PERSONS ARRESTED. WHILE THE COURTS ARE CONSIDERING TWO SEPARATE SUITS FILED BY SECULARISTS TO KEEP THE STREETS OPEN, A PUBLIC COMMITTEE WAS APPOINTED BY THE TRANSPORT MINISTRY TO LOOK INTO THE ENTIRE QUESTION. PUBLICATION OF ITS REPORT IS EXPECTED SHORTLY.

4. THE POLICE, CRITICIZED AND EVEN BODILY ATTACKED BY BOTH SIDES, HAVE BORNE THE BRUNT OF THE CROWDS' ANGER AND HAVE SUFFERED VIRTUALLY ALL THE INJURIES. THE INCIDENTS HAVE BECOME EMBARRASSING TO INTERIOR MINISTER, YOSEF BURG. UNDER THE NEW GOVERNMENT, POLICE ARE UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE INTERIOR MINISTRY AND, AS LEADER OF THE NRP, BURG HAS COME UNDER FIRE FROM BOTH SECULARIST AND RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS. EFFORTS AT COMPROMISE HAVE DONE LITTLE TO COOL PASSIONS AND HAVE FAILED TO MAINTAIN ORDER ON THE SABBATH. IT IS, HOWEVER, LIKELY THAT A DECISION BY THE TRANSPORT MINISTRY BASED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ON THE PUBLIC COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS (WHATEVER THEY ARE) WILL DIVERT ATTENTION TO THAT MINISTRY, WHOSE DIRECTION IS TEMPORARILY IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE.

5. COMMENT: THE CLASHES REFLECT THE INTENSE EMOTION ON THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION WHICH LIES JUST BELOW THE SURFACE IN ISRAELI SOCIETY. THE DEEP DIVISION CONCERNING RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE STRETCHES BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF MODERN JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN PALESTINE AND HAS PERSISTED SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE. CLASHES OVER RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE HAVE PERIODICALLY ERUPTED DESPITE THE GENERAL MODUS VIVENDI WORKED OUT LONG AGO BETWEEN THE LABOR PARTY AND THE NRP. THE CONTEST BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ELEMENTS IN ISRAEL IS COMING TO THE FORE AGAIN AND WILL HAVE AN EFFECT ON THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF THE RELIGIOUS ELEMENT IN THE NEW GOVERNMENT. IN ACT, THE NEW POLITICAL STRENGTH OF THE RELIGIOUS PARTIES PROBABLY ENCOURAGED THE BNAI BRAK TOWN COUNCIL TO UPSET THE GENERAL CALM THAT HAD PREVAILED BETWEEN OBSERVANT AND NONOBSERVANT RESIDENTS OF

THE CITY. BY THE SAME MEASURE, SECULARIST
GROUPS APPEAR TO HAVE DECIDED TO TEST THE GOVERN-
MENT'S INTENTIONS AND WILL ON THIS DELICATE
SUBJECT. WHATEVER THE FINAL OUTCOME OF THE BNAI
BRAK IMBROGLIO, THE RELIGIOUS ISSUE MAY BECOME A
MAJOR ISSUE TESTING THE COHESION AND ORIENTATION
OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT.
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